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### THE COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

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In Australia, the collecting and preservation of the paper-based documentary heritage of the country is a responsibility shared by a number of institutions, such as national, state, tertiary and local libraries. It also rests with a range of archival agencies such as the Australian Archives located in Canberra which has regional offices in each State and Territory, and State archives which have been set up and are maintained by each State Government. In addition, over recent years there has been an expansion of archival activity in the private sector as various corporations (particularly those operating in the mining and banking industries) have set up archival agencies of their own, both to manage current records and to care for older material which has accumulated over long periods of time.

The proliferation of collecting institutions of various kinds which has occurred in recent years is a reflection of two key factors. First, Australians have come to place importance on documenting and researching their national heritage. Secondly, with the establishment of the Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated (ASAI) and the setting up of accredited courses of study to supply the archival profession, there has developed since the 1970s a strong sense of professional purpose and identity amongst archivists. This new professionalism has worked to raise standards of practice within a range of archival agencies and has contributed to a higher level of awareness within the community of the importance of the paper-based materials which form a key part of our national documentary heritage. Archival management, as a distinct professional occupation, has become as important and as necessary a community task as librarianship, art and museum curatorship or the management and interpretation of historic buildings and natural history sites.

In 1983, the ASAI published under the title 'Our Heritage' (Canberra, 1983) a directory of archives and manuscript repositories in Australia. That directory lists 187 repositories of archives and manuscripts as against 51 repositories which had been identified and listed in a 1969 directory. Almost certainly, the number of institutions has again increased as new collecting needs or specialisations have emerged.

In comprehending the nature of archival and manuscript materials, it is important to draw a distinction between these two categories of records. The ASAI has provided the following definition of archives:

**Archives are those records which have been selected for permanent preservation, as a result of their administrative, financial, legal or research and information value. They are selected from amongst those records which are no longer required for the conduct of current activities. Archives are not necessarily 'old' records. Once a record is no longer required for frequent reference it is ready for consideration as an archive, even if it was created only a few days, weeks or months ago.**

The other key criterion in defining archival material is that the records are written documents and other media of recorded information which are created in the course of the activities of a government or semi-government agency, a private organisation or an individual. But while the term archives thus applied has a generic character, it should be noted that a certain distinction may be applied to other kinds of records such as single documents or artificial collections of documents assembled by individuals or institutions, each item having intrinsic historical or aesthetic significance. Such material is generally identified, particularly within libraries both in Australia and overseas, as manuscripts.

In Australia, the tradition of acquiring and preserving documentary material for retention in public collections extends back to the nineteenth century. In 1867 the Public (now State) Library of South Australia purchased a group of documents relating to the early history of the colony. The records of the Burke and Wills Expedition were acquired in 1874 by the Public (now State) Library of Victoria, while in 1884 the Government of New South Wales purchased in England a quantity of the Australian papers of the great eighteenth century botanist Sir Joseph Banks. These papers were placed in what was then called the Free Public Library in Sydney, the forerunner of the present-day State Library of New South Wales.

The collecting and preservation of such materials tended during these years to be ad hoc and lacking in any systematic or coherent purpose. The overall approach of most Australian libraries during the nineteenth century and, indeed, well into the twentieth was largely passive. It was left to a few private individuals to build up interesting collections of documents and records. The best-known of these collectors was David Scott Mitchell who, during a period of almost forty years, accumulated a remarkable collection of Australiana which formed the nucleus of the now world-famous Mitchell Library at the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney. Mitchell assembled what has been described as 'the most comprehensive collection of early Australian manuscripts'. His collection provided a rich base upon which, with the help of a generous financial endowment left at the time of his death, has been handsomely built upon by a succession of librarians right up until the present day. The Mitchell Collection today comprises the personal papers of many individuals who played a prominent part in the foundation, settlement and development of New South Wales as well as men and women who have been prominent in political, social, cultural, literary and artistic life at both a state and national level.

For a long period, the Mitchell Library dominated the collecting field in Australia. Indeed, it was not until the 1950s that the collecting environment began to change with the emergence of distinct Australiana departments in a number of state libraries such as the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History in 1956 and the La Trobe Library in the State Library of Victoria in 1965. Prior to this period, the Commonwealth National Library, the forerunner to the present-day National Library of Australia, had begun to acquire some important documentary material, including, in 1923, the **Endeavour** Journal (1768-1771) of Captain James Cook R.N., and, in the following decade, the first of a number of collections of prime ministerial papers. The National Library has gone on to develop an outstanding collection of papers of prominent Australian men and women across a wide range of national endeavour and achievement. Today it is one of the leading custodians of private papers and archival material and is a major centre for research based on these and other collections of Australian material. For much of the early twentieth century period, historical societies were also active collectors of historical records, sometimes more so than the established libraries.

The provision for the preservation of archival records of governments remained poor for many years largely as a result of an inadequate understanding of the distinction between archival principles and the practice of librarianship. The dominant tradition in Australia was for the management of archival records of government to be placed under library control, a situation which continued until the 1960s. Gradually new archival legislation began to be developed to provide separate and distinct charters to federal and state archival agencies. There is now almost universally a clear distinction in Australia between the work which is done by the national and

state archival agencies and the various research libraries such as the National Library of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales which maintain collections of private or personal papers as well as records of private organisations, businesses or societies.

In addition to the work done by the major national and state archival agencies and the various state libraries, there has been another tradition of specialist collecting which has assumed a new vigour in recent years. This tradition began after the First World War when the Australian War Memorial began to acquire private diaries and letters as well as official records relating to Australia's participation in various wars. Since then, a plethora of other specialist record-collecting agencies has emerged, bodies such as the Australian Academy of Science, the Percy Grainger Museum in the University of Melbourne and the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra. Within a number of Australian universities, various collecting specialisations have also been developed. Perhaps the best known of these is the University of Melbourne Archives which, since the 1950s, has built up an outstanding source of business and trade union records as well as collections of personal papers of men and women of achievement in a wide range of disciplines. Considerable strength in the field of business and trade union records is also maintained by the Archives of Business and Labour in the Australian National University in Canberra.

A number of Australian university libraries have developed a strong interest in acquiring and maintaining collections of literary manuscripts and personal papers of Australian writers. The Fryer Library in the University of Queensland is probably the best-known of these repositories but impressive work is now being done by the Library of the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra which has built up, in a remarkably short time, a strong collection of literary manuscripts and related records of younger Australian writers. The Baillieu Library in the University of Melbourne, the Reid Library in the University of Western Australia and the Barr Smith Library in the University of Adelaide have also acquired some important collections of literary and related papers.

Although traditionally most Australian libraries have built their collections by gift, there has emerged in recent years a greater emphasis on the purchase of material, largely in response to strong competition now evident between collecting institutions. Writers in particular have become conscious that their papers have a monetary value and are usually keen to capitalise on the willingness of libraries to pay for such material. A trend has emerged whereby writers will now seek to have their papers assessed by a number of institutions and then to accept the best financial offer. This is an issue of some concern as generally most purchases are made from funds made available to institutions through public appropriation.

A strong market has also developed for other kinds of records, particularly the papers and related records of artists and painters which have attracted the interest of some wealthy private collectors. Several antiquarian book sellers in Australia have also developed an interest in the manuscript trade and this has further added to the difficulties faced by public sector libraries in finding the funds to pay for increasingly high-priced collections. The Commonwealth Government's Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme established in 1978 has provided some relief since it offers taxation benefits to donors of material to accredited collecting institutions. Paradoxically, however, the Scheme has also served to set by definition a commercial framework against which almost all manuscript and archival collecting activity is now set.

Other forms of documentary material are also collected by a range of public institutions in Australia. Map materials will be found in several different kinds of collections although the main collections of printed maps have been developed in libraries. The most important of these is located in the National Library of Australia in Canberra though strong collections have also been built up in the State Libraries of New South Wales and Victoria and in the Baillieu Library in the University of Melbourne. Each of these institutions places a strong emphasis on Australian materials of both historical and current interest. Pictorial materials, especially photographs, are

collected in most of the large public sector libraries though it should be noted that photographs will also form integral parts of larger collections of manuscript and archival records. Philatelic materials are widely but not systematically distributed amongst several different kinds of collecting institutions. Important collections are held by the National Library of Australia, the State Library of New South Wales and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. More recently, Australia Post has established its own museum to serve as a comprehensive repository of Australia's philatelic history.

In the three years leading up to the Australian bicentenary celebrations in 1988, the Australian Bicentennial Authority conducted the Historic Records Search, a Project designed to locate, identify and record documentary material of historic importance preserved in private ownership. Over 3,000 collections of major importance were located during this Search. A full listing and description of these records was prepared and has recently been published in microfiche format by the National Library of Australia which has also undertaken responsibility for the maintenance of the register. The record may also be accessed on line through the OZLINE database available through the National Library of Australia.

Preservation of cultural and heritage materials has now become an important part of the management agenda for custodial institutions. Over the past twenty years there has been a substantial investment made by the major archives and libraries on high quality conservation facilities and in the appointment of expert staff, now largely recruited from training programs available in Australia. While substantial backlogs of material remain to be treated, Australia has achieved remarkable progress in a short time in the conservation management of its heritage collections. A greater financial investment is still required if fragile materials are to be secured for the benefit of future generations. Valuable work is being done by conservators working cooperatively across institutional boundaries to set appropriate preservation standards and agreed priorities for the treatment of these materials.

A number of professional societies and associations are also active in the field both to raise the standards of professional practice and to serve as lobby groups to achieve a higher level of political support for the specialised work which is required to preserve Australia's documentary heritage. Such bodies include the Australian Council of Archives, the Australian Council for Library and Information Services, the Australian Library and Information Association, the Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials and the Museums Association of Australia.

Australia has a strong and interesting record of achievement in the preservation and management of its documentary heritage. A wide-range of institutions has emerged, especially since the 1960s to achieve a more substantial collecting effort over a wide spectrum. Greater coordination of this effort could be achieved through cooperative programs to identify and list holdings and to establish more effective control over collections as well as to improve community access. There are signs, however, that such cooperative efforts are now being explored and it may be expected that with the assistance of a national computer network, control of, and access to, the documentary heritage of Australia will be greatly enhanced as the country moves towards the celebration of the centenary of Australian federation in 2001.

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